



Pirates Jack

New director, new companion, new booty, but same old Captain Jack Sparrow, promising that *Pirates Of The Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* is a return to the wacky joys of the original

WORDS IAN NATHAN



ON A MONITOR ON A SOUNDSTAGE IN THE SOUTHERN ENGLISH TOWN OF SHEPPERTON, CAPTAIN JACK SPARROW can be seen in 3D. The scene in question resides in a palatial chamber — all Thornhill murals and giltwood armchairs — rapidly descending into pandemonium. Various puff pastries, pork pies and sides of mutton are catapulted ceiling-wards from a banquet table, musket-fire clogs the air with sooty smoke, and his royal plumpness King George II (Richard Griffiths) looks on aghast as Jack (Johnny Depp), the inevitable centre of the

chaos, dementedly jogs left to right like Buster Keaton on hot coals, evading the grasp of the royal guard by a whisker, before tossing a priceless Rococo throne through an arched window and making his escape. Business as usual in the pleasurable frenetic universe of *Pirates Of The Caribbean*.

It's a tableau anchored by the figure of Hector Barbossa (Geoffrey Rush), atypically attired in naval togs and one large blue sock, whose badly smudged face powder cannot disguise a weary roll of the eyeballs. The sock? That's for the FX department to insert a recently acquired wooden leg. "Whatever else you say about Barbossa,"

notes Rush in passing, "he's a survivor."

There are two weeks to go on the 106-day shoot for this new stand-alone adventure. A long haul that has taken in Hawaii (for the middle of the film), Los Angeles (interiors for Hawaii), Puerto Rico (the end of the film), and finally London (the beginning). And it's all shot in genuine 3D, hence the intricate cameras with dual lenses and playback monitors with their cache of Ray Bans.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Wasn't there the pervading feeling that the previous two sequels were more *Matrix*-sequel gobbledegook than Indy on the high seas? The thought of a ▶

fourth slog through piratical waters felt a bit, well, rum.

"The thing with *Pirates 4*, I felt like we owed it to people... You know?" Johnny Depp takes an occasional pull on a thin black cigar while gathering his thoughts. "*Pirates 2* and *3* became quite... sub-plotty. The mathematics of it. All these people went to see them two or three times maybe just to figure out what was happening. This one is a little closer in tone to the first: a cleaner pass... more character driven... more subject driven... It has a freshness... Less mathematics."

SO WHERE WERE WE? AFTER THE DIZZYING CONCLUSION OF EPISODES TWO AND THREE, CAPTAIN JACK WAS IN POSSESSION OF A MAP TO THE FOUNTAIN OF youth, but adrift in the drink in barely a dinghy, minus his crew, minus his beloved Black Pearl and with nary a whiff of rum. Then the announcement there was, yes, to be a fourth in the series of highly lucrative comic fantasies (2,681,440,232 doubloons and counting). "We were already playing around with another story on three," smiles Jerry Bruckheimer, "and when Ted and Terry found the book, we were really inspired." "Ted and Terry" are Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio, the writing duo who have fathered the ongoing calamities of Captain Jack thus far: "the book" is Tim Powers's 1988 novel *On Stranger Tides*, a straight pirate adventure that could happily relax into a Captain Jack yarn.

"So much of it derives from the novel," says Rossio: "Blackbeard, Angelica, the fountain of youth... Stylistically, we have integrated the book into our universe with Captain Jack and Barbossa."

But with Gore Verbinski unable to face another voyage, they were down a major guiding light. Bruckheimer diplomatically reports the director



Jack surfs that stranger tide.

"Johnny has a huge influence on the script: he invented characters, storylines, jokes..." **Terry Rossio**



Jack and Barbossa, taken aback by what's going on in the rigging.

was simply busy with other projects (animated Depp-as-gecko flick *Rango*, and the since-stalled videogame adaptation *Bioshock*). With Depp still agreeable, Disney was keen to keep the sequel moving, and *Chicago* director Rob Marshall was hired. A clever move — a master of screen musicals is ideal for a *Pirates* movie, with its own peculiar dance moves.

"He's so sensitive to what is going on in the frame," approves Depp of his new director. "If he senses bullshit, he'll call a person on it. Politely, of course. He can feel the overacting." Even amid the dementia of *Pirates*, there are subtle cadences, natural rhythms — call it *arrggghht*. "He's brought this incredible timing," continues the star. "Especially because of his background — you can be a millisecond out and he calls you on it." Today on set, it's Marshall's birthday. In a secret alcove, unavailable to *Empire*, champagne is served without anyone needing to fall over. Ten minutes later they are back to work.

BRIEFING

Pirates Of The Caribbean: On Stranger Tides

Released: May 19

Director: Rob Marshall

Starring: Johnny Depp, Penélope Cruz, Geoffrey Rush, Ian McShane, Kevin McNally

Story: Captain Jack Sparrow (Depp) is back, and on the hunt for the fabled fountain of youth. Only he has old flame Angelica (Cruz) to deal with. And dreaded pirate Blackbeard (McShane). And his longtime foe Barbossa (Rush), now a privateer in the employ of King George II (Richard Griffiths).

Even after Marshall's appointment, trouble loomed when Disney reshuffled its hierarchy and studio chairman Dick Cook was asked to step down. Given Cook had championed the then high-risk original, Depp was less than impressed. "There's a fissure, a crack in my enthusiasm at the moment," he reported on hearing the news. "It was all born in that office." *Pirates 4* looked on the rocks, but after a "wonderful meeting" Marshall convinced Depp to keep the faith. After all, no Captain Jack, no *Pirates*: "It would be a pirate movie," senses Rossio, "but not *Pirates Of The Caribbean*."

On set to facilitate improv and on-the-spot alterations (Elliott is in LA — they take it in turns), the writer has been impressed with the new director's fastidiousness. "Rob works as he does in theatre. He spent a lot of time refining the screenplay prior to production. And Johnny has a huge influence on the script: he invented characters, invented storylines, jokes..."

Rossio had always pictured a scene of Jack dancing on deck. "It would be romantic and odd, just the image of Jack Sparrow being seductive. Starlight, all of that." And a new leading lady, in shapely Penélope Cruz as the shady Angelica (we'll come to that), presented a perfect opportunity. "Johnny added this idea to



Jack (Johnny Depp), back where he belongs — in trouble again.

cut in on himself," laughs the writer. "He's in the middle of this dance and swings off on a rope then reappears, 'May I cut in?'"

YOU'LL HAVE GATHERED SHIPMATES HAVE BEEN JETTISONED BETWEEN THREE AND FOUR. ORLANDO BLOOM AND KEIRA KNIGHTLEY —

Will and Elizabeth — are no longer required, their storylines concluded (pressed on the chance of cameo appearances, Rossio shakes his head). But there is an enticing range of new personnel. In arguably the Will and Elizabeth mould are newcomers Sam Claflin as pacifist missionary Philip, and French model-turned-actress Astrid Berges-Frisbey as fetching mermaid Syrena. (How does she manage both water and land? "Magic!" she exclaims. "CGI!")

The new villain of the piece is Captain Blackbeard, a liberal take on history's Edward Teach, scourge of the American colonies. Played by Ian McShane dolled up in black leathers and with a beard that could thatch a cottage, he's a "biker pirate" who takes charge of the Queen Anne's Revenge (chief motif: skulls). "He's a force, man," grooves Depp. "An incredible force. A legend." This is most likely a reference to McShane's Al Swearengen, the Mephistopheles of *Deadwood*, rather than antique-market scallywag Lovejoy, but with Depp, who knows?

So: Penélope. *On Stranger Tides*' Latina Exocet — the delectable, devilish, great-in-a-velvet-hat Angelica. Again, Marshall, who directed her in *Nine*, was key to persuading the Spanish actress to join up: "She liked the role, but he was the sealer," says Bruckheimer. >

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: ON STRANGER TIDES

At her mention Depp pulls an impish grin from ear to gold-ringed ear. "We did a film called *Blow* together; I have to be careful to not say, 'We did *blow* together'," he smirks, channelling Keef. "She's a funny girl. A firecracker. She brings a lot to the table." Angelica and Jack have a past, "a residue" as Depp puts it. "That sounds bad doesn't it? There's a chemistry there. They're like a divorced couple who hate each other and at the same time love one another. It's a very strange relationship. A lot of fun..." He grins, golden, recalling something we have yet to see: "We've upped the stakes in terms of absurdity."

Hints abide that she could be Blackbeard's daughter and not to be trusted. But it's a pirate movie. *No-one* is to be trusted. More serious for the production, although wonderful for Cruz, was the news midway through filming she was pregnant (padre: Javier Bardem). "You won't be able to tell," smiles Bruckheimer. "We have a great stunt double. Doesn't change her abilities, she's just got bigger... More glow."

SOMEWHERE IN *ON STRANGER TIDES* IS A BED WITH A SKELETON TIED TO IT. FOR THE EAGLE-EYED DISNEYLAND PATRON, IT'S A FURTHER REFERENCE TO

that clunky old ride where this all began. A gesture that events, in four, are bucking current sequels and getting lighter, more fun. This is a plot designed to glide like a musical. As the film begins, Jack, not for the first time, is in custody, hauled before the king of England no less, in old London town (exteriors: Greenwich Royal Naval College), who has gotten wind he has a map to the fountain of youth.

Cue today's rollicking escape. Then a chase involving 20 carriages, 50 horses, and a coal truck exploding in an exquisite Thames-side street set (Dickens does Tortuga). Angelica will "rescue" the ever-wriggling Jack, they'll join in an acrobatic swordfight amid exploding beer barrels in the storeroom of the Captain's Daughter Tavern



Angelica (Penélope Cruz) observes as Jack and Blackbeard (Ian McShane) give each other the eye (liner).

(notably bigger than the tavern), and end up dunked in the river (actually an underwater stage at Shepperton).

That, good people, is just the beginning. In essence, the film is a race (Barbossa vs. Blackbeard vs. Angelica vs. Jack) to the fabled fountain deep in a mysterious jungle. Dirty tricks abound. As do mermaids, zombies, Keith Richards and Kevin McNally's less-than-reliable first mate Gibbs. Not to forget the love of Jack's life: The Black Pearl. "We get a sliver or two of Jack's story," adds Depp. "How he first met Angelica." But as the actor insists Jack remains the series' constant, he's not going to evolve. "He's at his max," he laughs.

Here is the true secret of *Pirates Of The Caribbean*: we're not returning for the new stuff, but the old. Jack must always be Jack. "Jack Sparrow is the counter-punch character," says Rossio. "In the first three movies Elizabeth Swann is our protagonist, it's her story, hers and Will Turner's. Jack is a supporting character in a sense, he influences people around him." The punchline to their set-up.

You might imagine that infuriates the ever-adventurous Depp, an actor who has always tottered away from the straight-and-narrow. But no: "It is satisfying," he says of the rock in his professional life. "I've known people like Hunter Thompson who was who he was his whole life. He was a genius. It's fun knowing Jack won't change. Weirdly, there's safety in that: he has a dumb side, a clever side, he's sort of a weird... reptile."

That's why the door is always open for Captain Jack. Maybe not in knotted trilogies, but certainly stand-alone missions: the unreliable James Bond of the Spanish Main. However gruelling — and all that slapstick takes its toll ("We certainly hammer it") — *Pirates* films are a joy to make. "They are the same camera crew, same grip department, a family. The process feels intimate," extols Depp. "Yes, there are large set pieces, big stunts, but when you are shooting it feels like... home."

► *Pirates Of The Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* is out on May 19 and will be reviewed in a future issue.

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